

Schools audit has Bridgeport working out its problems

Linda Conner Lambeck

Published 12:26 am, Monday, November 24, 2014

BRIDGEPORT -- Special education services in the school district are suffering because of misdirected resources, undertrained staff and failure to follow the individual education plans developed for students, a recent audit shows.

"There were issues," said Margaret McDonald, director of technical assistance for the Capitol Regional Education Council, the Hartford-based agency, which did the audit. Still, McDonald said the district seems to understand the problems and is moving to correct many of them.

"They are not dragging their feet," she said.

Last spring, (in response to a Complaint filed by the Center for Children's Advocacy), the school district was reprimanded by the state for failing to comply with a so-called Child Find Law, which requires monitoring and testing of students who are chronically absent, failing or misbehaving.

That finding prompted a full-scale audit of the district's special education services.

The audit, completed this fall and presented to the school board's student achievement committee this month, not only told the district what is wrong with its special education programs, but spells out how to fix the problems.

And along with the bad, there was some good. McDonald said she found the district's autism programs to be excellent.

One of the biggest areas of concern was with individual education plans the district must develop annually for every student receiving special education.

The report found in many cases the plans were not updated as often as they should be and were not being followed. Twenty percent of the time, parents had not consented to the planning.

"That puts you out of compliance," McDonald said.

And only 39 percent of the time was there evidence that the plan was benefiting students.

The report also found the way the district assigned special education administrators was problematic. As a result, things were falling through the cracks.

To conduct the audit, CREC visited schools, interviewed staff, students and parents. It looked at spending, the size of the special education population, how services were being carried out and if students were benefiting from the services.

The report also found:

- Bridgeport doesn't spend any more or less than many of its peer districts, but could spend what it has in a better way.
- Bridgeport identifies fewer students (13 percent) for special education than its peers (17 percent), and slightly more than the state (11 percent).
- Bridgeport sends fewer students to out-of-district placements than it did last year and spends less than its peers on out-of-district tuition.
- Bridgeport's ratio of staff to special ed student -- 1:13 -- is comparable to its peers and it actually has a better paraprofessional to student ratio -- 1 to 9 -- than many.
- Teacher aides had not been receiving training.
- The district is not collecting all the Medicaid reimbursements it is entitled to, largely because of software issues. The district is also leaving some grant money it could qualify for on the table.
- Administrators need to be reallocated by zones. The district has already started to do that.
- The district needs to create its own program for 18- to 21-year-old students. It would cost less money and be better for students if an in-house program was developed.
- There was little evidence that enough was being done to help students in regular classrooms to prevent a referral to special education.

Interim Schools Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz said much of what was recommended in the report is already being addressed. "It's nice to have an audit, but it's also nice to have a plan," she said. "You will see us sticking to this plan."

Administrators have been reassigned to zones, training is occurring, and new software is in place that has improved the accuracy of IEP's.

Rob Arnold, the district's executive director of specialized instruction, said the district moved from an ineffective paper reporting system to an ineffective software system when Paul Vallas was superintendent. This fall it switched to a third system called IEP Direct that Arnold said was "awesome."

The district also added a part-time interventionist in every school, Rabinowitz said, noting "much more is needed."

McDonald said her agency has conducted more than 50 such audits around the state and elsewhere.

Bridgeport's problems are not substantially different than what has been uncovered elsewhere, and the size of the district tends to magnify the problems, she said.